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TRAINING IN ILLITERACY¹

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If there be any matter connected with the large subject of education on which the people of this country would agree, it is that the ability to write correct and reasonably clear English is its most important practical result. Every school, or at any rate every secondary school, is expected to give to its pupils the power to express themselves in correct and reasonably clear English; and failure to do so in any large number of cases is regarded as discreditable to the school.

Most laymen, whether parents or employers, would assume as unnecessary of proof the further proposition that the responsibility for good English rests with the teachers of English in the schools. As to this second proposition, however, there is ground for difference of opinion; the main purpose of this paper will be to show that the present very spotted record of our schools in this matter of English is not to be laid at the door of the teachers of English alone. The training of teachers in English and the quality of the textbooks have improved immensely in the last fifteen years. We have not yet arrived at perfection, but even the imperfect knowledge that I have of the teaching of English in the schools makes me sure that this work is in the main sound and effective. The fault which we admit must too often be found with the result does not lie wholly, at any rate, with the teachers of English.

What other causes, then, can be found for this lamentable failure of our schools? One can think offhand of several. There is the fact that the teacher of English in the city schools is swamped by the ever-increasing flood of the foreign-born, and must not infrequently impart the rudiments of the language to

¹ Revision of an address on "Co-operation in English" delivered before the New England Association of Teachers of English, at Springfield, Mass., November, 1908.

children who out of school hear only Italian or Yiddish or some dialect of Bohemia or Poland. Another cause is that the teacher of English is expected to teach two subjects in a single allotment of time. A boy must be taught not only to write, but also to read his literature intelligently and accurately as well; and the teacher of English in most schools has one allowance of time for this double job. I often wonder how the teacher of English gets any time at all for composition. Another cause is the astonishing appetite that the present generation has for the cheaper newspapers and magazines, a sort of reading which seems invented to asphyxiate any growing sense for style. All these are undoubtedly true and serious causes; but none of them, I think, is so grave as the one which is the subject of this paper: the condoning of illiteracy by teachers of other subjects. On this matter there can be, I believe, only one reasonable view; this is a practice which is discreditable to the schools in which it is found. It is a shameful waste of the time of the boys and girls in the school, and of the money of the taxpayers, that results which are laboriously built up by the toil of one set of teachers should be thrown down and scattered to the winds by the indifference or ignorance of their associates. No business house would hire one set of clerks to collect and tabulate accounts, and then allow the other clerks to tear up and scatter the sheets in any way that suited their own convenience. Yet that is closely analogous to what is taking place in most of our schools, if only one adds that the first set of clerks must afterward pick up and piece together the *dissecta membra* of their original achievement, and so do their work all over again. Such a state of affairs seems absurd and monstrous when baldly stated; yet a very cursory examination would show that it exists in most of our schools today.

Now, to begin with, this condoning of illiteracy cuts square across what I suppose to be one of the fundamental principles of teaching, that a habit can be acquired only by unremitting and unbroken practice. The new science of psychology has confirmed this principle and formulated it more clearly, perhaps; but since teachers began to teach, all wise practitioners have insisted on the

scriptural doctrine, "precept upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little and there a little." The command of a correct and clear style in writing must be a habit: except for the almost minute minority who are gifted by nature, mankind gains control of its mother tongue by the long and slow process of transmuting rules into instinctive action. This is especially true of writing correctly. A word must be spelled in the one right way so often that the visual and auditory and motor channels by which it comes to its place on the paper are worn into a rut so deep that it becomes an effort to break away from that particular combination of letters. Commas and semicolons and periods must have been used so often and so regularly in their appropriate place in given combinations of words that they drop from the pen without thought on the part of the writer. Simple or compound or complex sentences must have been used so frequently that they shape themselves to the flow of ideas and impressions without conscious thought. And the less the background of culture the more certain it is that this habit of correct and clear expression on paper can be built up only by constant and unremitting repetition of the one right form.

What happens to the boy or girl whose habits of expression are thus in process of slow creation when he goes to a school where respectable English is not insisted on in all his classes? In a morning of perhaps five periods he will spend one period under the supervision of a teacher of English and four under other teachers. If now for the one hour he must spell and punctuate carefully and write complete and grammatical sentences, and then for the other four he writes and speaks as carelessly and illiterately as he chooses, how far ahead is he in the formation of this habit that the world outside the school expects of him as a matter of course? In most cases he has lost ground; and in schools where such culpable laxity of organization prevails, the teacher of English is eternally rolling his pupils up hill to see them fall back in the succeeding hours. The average boy is so far human that he will ordinarily take no more trouble than he has to; and it is indubitably harder for him, as for grown people, to write carefully. If his teacher of history or physics

or zoölogy will accept exercises with misspelled words, no punctuation, and abortive or undivided sentences, the average boy will shower them on him with careless and unstinting hand; and the efforts of the teacher of English to establish the habit of writing respectably become a vain fighting of the air.

It is not a theoretical state of affairs, of which I am writing, which might occur under the worst imaginable conditions. I have lately written to the headmasters of half a dozen public schools which were recommended to me as likely to show the best practice in the neighborhood of Boston; and they have been kind enough to send me exercises in other subjects than English which had been corrected in the customary way by the teacher of the special subject. An examination of these papers shows that the notice taken of bad English varies curiously, even in the same school. In one school the papers in botany were thoroughly corrected for English, even to the punctuation. The papers in zoölogy from the same school were written in sentences so shapeless that the meaning was often obscured by the lack of grammar, and whole paragraphs were innocent of both periods and capital letters; yet there was no indication that the teacher of zoölogy felt in any way disturbed or aggrieved by this illiteracy. In another school the papers in zoölogy again, as it happened, were full of shapeless sentences; and even so gross a misspelling as "a sought of thin skin" had been allowed by the teacher to pass without notice. But in this second school the papers in German sight translation were corrected thoroughly for their English, even to the point of insisting on the proper use of quotation marks. Thus in two schools which are considered to be representative of our best teaching in New England boys and girls are exposed to teachers whose influence on them is toward the formation of habits of illiteracy and against the formation of the habits of correct expression which they are expected to have when they leave that school. It is not too much to say, I think, that this is an unpardonable and discreditable waste of the time and energy of those boys and girls and of the money of the taxpayers who support those schools.

Nor is this waste necessary. If we begin to press this reform,

we shall be met at once by the cry that other teachers are already overburdened, that their backs will break if they must teach English as well as history or German or zoölogy. This cry we must expect, and it is not to be taken too seriously. The answer to it is twofold. In the first place it is a protest against doing something which no one ever asked should be done. No one expects that a teacher of history or of physics shall in the time given to history or physics teach English also; not only that, but it is not desirable that he should teach English, unless he has had special training for the purpose. The only thing that can be expected is that such a teacher shall either decline to accept written exercises that are splotted with misspelled words and abortive sentences, or else that he shall take notice of such illiteracies. He has no right to confirm bad habits in his pupils. In the second place, as the few papers which I have examined show, we are asking for no impossibilities. Good teachers of other subjects already, and apparently as a matter of course, take notice of bad English, and do their proper share toward the creating of the habit of writing respectably. A boy who is under such a teacher of botany or German is strengthening his habit of good English in at least one hour outside his regular instruction in English. And if a teacher of botany can do this, it is hard to see why a teacher of zoölogy should not do the same thing. It is therefore no scheme from Utopia that I am proposing when I hold that every teacher in a school should negatively, at any rate, take his or her part in the slow but steady formation of correct habits in the use of English.

Indeed schools, and we may hope that their number is not few, have already attacked this problem successfully. One excellent plan, which originated in the English High School of Boston, has been further developed and applied at the High School of Commerce in Boston. There, as the head of the department of English writes me, they hold

that it is unjust to the teacher in a department other than English to require him to correct more than casually mistakes in English, and unjust to the student who has proved his knowledge of a particular subject, to lower his mark in that subject because his English is poor. We have,

therefore, adopted the following plan. In case a pupil's test or exercise is noticeably defective in grammar, spelling, or punctuation, he must rewrite the exercise, correcting both particulars, or revise it before the mark given him in that subject is recorded. Second, without warning to the pupils of English, teachers frequently collect exercises and tests given in other subjects and correct them from the standpoint of English, entering the English mark thus obtained with the regular English marks.

We may suppose that other schools already are accomplishing this end in the same, or similar ways. Such a plan, if quietly and systematically enforced, removes the whole evil of which I have been speaking. It has one decided advantage from the point of view of the school: it encourages teachers of other subjects to look on reasonably correct and clear English as their right. Among the papers from schools which I have looked over, I found in some of the papers in zoölogy cases where two, or even three, sentences were run together without capitals or punctuation; and a boy in a class in political science wrote: "If the electoral college were abolished it would be very harmful." Now why should a teacher of zoölogy or of political science be expected to plow through these drifts of obscurity and illiteracy? If the idea could be implanted in the minds of such teachers that their time is wasted every time they have such unintelligible stuff handed in to them, we should be well started on the way to getting rid of the evil. If the normal boy be allowed to put in slovenly English he will certainly do so; but there is no reason why teachers of other subjects should not find out the degree of accuracy and correctness to which the teacher of English thinks that a given class should have attained, and then politely but firmly decline to look at any paper which does not reach that standard. And if a teacher will not assert his rights, the head-master of the school should assert them for him and insist on his getting them.

Furthermore, every teacher in a school should feel that his or her real work is education, and not merely the teaching of a special subject. At all times it is his duty to make war on illiteracy. Until all teachers take this broad view of their profession and of their opportunities for good, we shall have badly educated children—children who know whether the third leg of a

grasshopper is on its mesothorax or its metathorax, but who, when they go to a business man to ask for work will expose their illiteracy as soon as they put pen to paper.

Now what can be done about the situation? The great number of stenographers and typewriters whose education has ended with the grammar school or the high school, except for some short training in a business college, shows that it is not unreasonable for average people to master the elements of correct expression; yet anyone who has read the examinations for entrance to any of our colleges has come to look on blundering and slovenly English as the regular equipment of the young men who are supposed to be the pick of their communities. There is no need of any new theory on the subject; for any headmaster or superintendent one may ask will answer automatically, "Every lesson should be a lesson in English;" and so in practice it is, but usually in bad English; and there in most cases the matter will rest. One of the bad specimens I have quoted above had been passed without notice by the headmaster of the school. Superintendents and school committees must bestir themselves, and light fires under the teachers if we are to have practical and effective attention to this very elementary question. It would not be a very difficult thing for the chairman of a school committee or a superintendent to collect papers occasionally from the schools for which he is responsible; and I feel pretty sure that in most cases he would be scandalized by the results. Then it would be a simple matter to announce that all teachers of all subjects would be held personally responsible if they received exercises badly spelled and obscurely expressed. Here I am not speaking without personal experience, for I have just seen a kindred experiment tried on the freshman class in English composition in Harvard College. Last autumn it was announced to the class that any piece of writing in which there were as many as two misspellings to the page would be called a failure. Four or five weeks afterward bad spelling had mostly disappeared from the writing of a class of four hundred and fifty men. Within a few days a student who has been teaching in one of the practice courses in a neighboring school has told me that

he has tried the same experiment on children of the upper grades of the grammar school, and with entire success. If the method has worked in these two cases why should it not work in others? If teachers of all subjects will resolutely decline to read exercises which are below the standard in correctness and clearness of English the boys and girls in our schools will acquire the habits of writing presentably. If these teachers go on as they are doing today, ignoring and condoning slovenly and incorrect writing, the same children will grow up with stumbling and discreditable habits of expressing themselves.